



Culture captured in art

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With pen and ink, Laboratory employee and artist Michael E. Martinez takes to paper, beautifully crafting a bleached skull with a headdress inspired by the American Plains Indians. To give it a New Mexican theme, Michael uses the Zia symbol for the skull's eyes and accents the smooth face and war bonnet with turquoise coloring.

"I come from a creative family," says Martinez, who works in the Lab's weapon stockpile modernization division. "When I was a kid, I would watch my grandpa make almost anything. . . he found ways to make tools to work in his garden, to keep his truck going, anything like that."

Martinez tapped into his own creativity early, learning to express himself by drawing. As a teen, he and his brother Adam (who also works at the Laboratory) would work on cars.

"We just did not have the money back then to have someone do a custom paint job for the cars," notes Martinez. "So my brother and I usually wound up painting them ourselves. I worked on the designs and that led to trying my hand at illustration and painting."

"Before I decided to venture into the commercial world, I did paintings here and there, mostly for family and friends," Martinez recalls. "In 2013, I had back surgery, so for a while I wasn't as active as I was before. One day my kid came home after school saying he needed to do a drawing, so I helped him out. My wife Candie saw the drawing and asked why I didn't paint more. . . . since then things have really taken off."

The Land of Enchantment for creative inspiration

His particular style and flair come from the rich cultures thriving in New Mexico. In 2016 he created the official t-shirt design for Zozobra, a giant marionette effigy built and burned during the annual Fiestas de Santa Fe. In 2017, he illustrated Zozobra again, this time for the official Evergreen Zozobra Poster.

"New Mexico culture is more than inspiration to me," Martinez explains, "I've grown up as part of it. My whole family participates in the arts and crafts festivals, making artistic items to sell."

Martinez has found that most of his commissions fall into traditional categories, such as religious icons, Catholic symbolism and symbols personifying death. Despite these requests, he always looks for ways to keep his art fresh.

“I try to do something different all the time,” Michael says. “So, even for like a holiday like Dia de los Muertos, which brings with it a lot of symbols, I try to introduce my own thoughts and give the illustrations a modern approach.”

Martinez’ artwork uses a variety of approaches, from traditional acrylics to modern mixed media and computerized graphic design. He has received many awards for this work, including the Contemporary Hispanic Market First Time Exhibitor award.

Martinez is currently a featured artist at Keep Contemporary Gallery on the Santa Fe Plaza. Michael also often works for charitable causes: he created a t-shirt design for the Pueblo of Pojoaque Toy Run, and contributes artwork to associations that raise money to help underprivileged children.

Michael’s latest exploration is in different types of media. “I am working with new types of resins to give my paintings more dimension,” he says. “I like different metals, woods and other elements—I haven’t done a canvas painting in a while because I am exploring all these new elements. It’s all experiment, it’s all new and different, but it’s all me.”

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